

Sherryl Broverman: WISER

WISER

WISER (The Women's Institute for Secondary Education and Research) is a Kenyan non-governmental organization that transformed from a dream to a success within the span of a few short years. Thanks to the entrepreneurial spirit of Andy Cunningham, the academic know-how and connections of Dr. Sherryl Broverman, and the insider knowledge of Dr. Rose Odhiambo, a few passionate individuals were able to see a community's needs and address them with a meaningful, sustainable program.

The Power of Education

Dr. Broverman briefly met Dr. Odhiambo in 2002 in San Jose, CA at a meeting to develop collaborations between American and African scholars for HIV/AIDS courses. Only two years later, Dr. Odhiambo invited Dr. Broverman to her home in Muhuru Bay, Kenya, where together they realized that education could help close the overwhelmingly vast gender gap. Shortly thereafter, Andy took one of Dr. Broverman's courses at Duke University, AIDS and Emerging Diseases, and realized how he could synthesize his interests while making a tangible change.

Andy Cunningham

In an interview with the Duke Chronicle¹, Andy explained that Dr. Broverman's class taught him what he could do about international gender and education issues, since disease (particularly HIV/AIDS) is correlated with education in many countries. As both a Truman Scholar and a Robertson Scholar, Andy was part of a variety of influential networks and had experience working on international and humanitarian issues. Andy says his impetus for starting WISER was Dr. Broverman's course, which led to a DukeEngage project that enabled him to travel to Muhuru Bay the following summer. Conversely, Dr. Broverman says she would never have had the courage to start such a big venture without Andy.

Dr. Sherryl Broverman

Dr. Broverman first traveled to Kenya and developed a close friendship with Dr. Odhiambo in 2003, when she received a small grant to further develop collaboration among scholars across the Atlantic Ocean, and determine a broader research project in Kenya. A year later, Dr. Broverman returned to Kenya and traveled with Dr. Odhiambo to her hometown, Muhuru Bay. Muhuru Bay is a small fishing village located in the Nyanza province of Kenya, near the Tanzanian border on the shore of Lake Victoria. Muhuru Bay also has the highest HIV and malaria infection rates in the country; in addition, Nyanza is the poorest province in Kenya, and political isolation has held back its progress. Dr. Broverman explains, "On my first trip to Muhuru Bay, I was scared of getting sick, and I didn't want to drink the water or eat the food," since she was so unfamiliar with the people and the culture. However, her own discomfort paled in comparison to the compassion and compunction she felt for the girls and women who shared their stories of humiliation, rape, and helplessness.

"It was so clear that the gender issues ran so deep," she says. "Clearly the men in Muhuru Bay were not facing the same issues, and certainly not at the same scale." After connecting with some of the women in Muhuru Bay, Dr. Broverman began donating money to pay some of their school fees because she had an emotional need to do *something*; however, there was a clear need for a larger-scale program if she wanted to impact more than one person at a time.

In 2006, Dr. Broverman enlisted her AIDS and Emerging Diseases class to raise money to buy back the dowry of a young woman she befriended; simultaneously she received a grant from the Trent Foundation to research "HIV and Obstacles to Girls' Education in Kenya." As part of one of her seminar courses, Dr. Broverman always assigned a real-life application of a component of her AIDS and Emerging Diseases course; in 2007 the project was researching effective boarding schools in Kenya and East Africa and writing a business plan that outlined building and operating a school for girls in Muhuru Bay.

Dr. Rose Odhiambo

Dr. Odhiambo is the only female from Muhuru Bay ever to qualify for or graduate from college. Dr. Broverman believes Dr. Odhiambo had the opportunity to pursue higher education due to several factors: a supportive adult, her status, and her personality.

Dr. Odhiambo's aunt was very supportive of her education and believed that she could succeed, whereas most other girls in Muhuru Bay did not have a female role model or advocate. Additionally, Dr. Odhiambo is the daughter of the Chief of Muhuru Bay, so her status provided her some protection from both internal and external dangers other girls face when attending school, including rape and coercion by male teachers, classmates, and members of the community. Finally, Dr. Broverman describes Dr. Odhiambo as brilliant, rebellious, strong, and compassionate. Her intellect earned her scholarships so school fees were irrelevant, and she wanted to use her good fortune to help other girls and become a role model to provide for other girls the support she received from her aunt.

Dr. Odhiambo's esteem among her community and her knowledge of both the culture of Muhuru Bay and the culture and standards of a university put her in the perfect position to connect Dr. Broverman and Andy with the appropriate community members.

The Evolution of WISER

Dr. Broverman met Dr. Odhiambo in Kenya in 2003 and traveled with her to Muhuru Bay in 2004. In 2005, Dr. Broverman received a National Science Foundation grant to connect her Duke University students with Dr. Odhiambo's Egerton University students. In the summer of 2006, DukeEngage provided a grant for Dr. Broverman and seven undergraduate students, including Andy, to research the state of girls' schooling in Muhuru Bay through interviews, focus groups, and town hall meetings. In 2007, eight undergraduate students accompanied Dr. Broverman to Muhuru Bay to run Camp WISER, a pilot program for the boarding school. The summer of 2008 was marred as Duke cancelled the DukeEngage grants for undergraduates to travel to Muhuru Bay due to the violence and political turmoil engulfing Kenya.

Today, as the WISER website details, some of the plans for the school include 120 female students, grades 9-12, with 70% receiving full scholarships, a predominantly female staff to provide role models, enhanced health education for students and the surrounding community, a computer lab with internet access powered by solar energy, and water pumped from Lake Victoria with solar and wind energy.

Challenges

Dr. Broverman says that overall, the biggest challenge has been navigating the multiple legal and cultural systems that are involved in WISER, which include U.S. federal, state, and local laws, as well as Duke University's policies, Egerton University's policies, Kenya's national laws, and Muhuru Bay's governance and cultural norms. She explains that in particular, overcoming the cultural divide between Duke and Muhuru Bay

has been a struggle. “Duke is an excellent resource and they have been extremely supportive by letting me pursue this project as part of my role at the university, but there are some necessary bureaucratic components that were not designed for international development,” she says. The recent political instability in Kenya also affects whether Duke will fund travel for students and raises concerns about the safety and primary needs of inhabitants of Muhuru Bay.

In addition to balancing the diverse policies, Dr. Broverman says not being in Kenya full-time is one of the hardest parts of co-founding and chairing an international organization in which she is so emotionally involved. WISER also faces the typical challenges of any new non-profit venture, including fundraising worries and concerns about meeting the expectations of all the stakeholders, but particularly those of the people of Muhuru Bay who are so engaged in the project.

Successes

In five years, WISER became a full-fledged NGO with offices and staff in Kenya and the US, as well as a board of directors and boards of advisors for both Duke and Muhuru Bay. The community support on both sides of the Atlantic is evident from the excitement of the Duke students and the future WISER students. The Chief of Muhuru Bay donated 10 acres of land for the school to demonstrate the community’s support and commitment to WISER. Also, fundraising thus far has been successful, with \$520,000 committed as of 2007 with a predicted annual operating budget for the school of \$125,000.

Dr. Broverman attributes the success of WISER to the relationships among the stakeholders and partners. “Dream big,” she says. “With my methodical nature and Andy’s pure enthusiasm, we made a naïve timeline to try to anticipate possible obstacles and create contingency plans, but ultimately, flexibility is important.” Dr. Broverman also advises potential entrepreneurs to understand the community needs through a thorough landscape analysis and to make sure the community is engaged and interested in the service or product before starting the venture. She encourages entrepreneurs to identify and involve every stakeholder, even those that may not seem obvious.

Vision for the Future

Drs. Broverman and Odhiambo continue their research as WISER participants in the U.S. and Kenya continue to do field work developing the program. “We keep refining and evolving and trying to do more,” Dr. Broverman says. “We want these girls to get something past a high school degree. We want this to be a launching pad for them to gain social capital and business skills, and put them in a position to be successful in society.” According to the WISER website, last updated in 2007, the organization aims to enroll the first two WISER classes in January 2010, a third class in January 2011, and a fourth class in 2012, when the first two classes would graduate. Ultimately, the WISER website lists the organization’s objectives as:

- Work to achieve gender parity in education
- Build a community of girls who, as alumnae, will create a valuable social network of educated and motivated female leaders
- Enhance access to health education, health care, technology training, and microfinance for the surrounding community

APPENDIX

Sherryl Broverman, Chair and co-Founder, WISER Kenyan-US NGO Board
Associate Professor of Practice, Biology, Duke University
(919) 668-0228
sbrover@duke.edu

WISER website: <http://www.wisergirls.org/>

WISER Vision:

Our vision is that one day all women will be granted access to equal and safe educational opportunities through achievement of gender parity inside and outside of the classroom. Our hope is that women will be able to maximize their potential to use their abilities to be active participants in their communities, not just as women, but as women leaders. We believe a girls' boarding school is much more than a place where boys are absent. Rather, it is the center of cultivating the next generation of community, national, and international leaders.

WISER Mission:

The Women's Institute for Secondary Education and Research (WISER), a Kenyan NGO, will be a model for girls' education and community development in post-conflict, rural Kenya by establishing the first girls' secondary boarding school and research center dedicated to expanding the social and economic capital of women in the southern Lake Victoria region. WISER will focus on academic excellence and fostering an entrepreneurial spirit of inquiry and intellectual independence, as well as providing programs to build leadership capacity in community health, technology and economic development. WISER will provide the first potable water, wind and solar power, and computer technology in the region. WISER will also work with community members who desire adult education, as well as provide special programs for young men who wish to become gender allies.

To support WISER:

Visit <http://wisergirls.org/support/> to get more information about how to support WISER.

Checks for donations may be made payable to Duke-WISER and sent to:
WISER at Duke University Attn: Karen Gray
Box 90519 Duke Global Health Institute
Durham, NC 27708-0519 USA

Student contact information:

Abby Liebeskind
(301) 466-5322
abby.liebeskind@gmail.com

ⁱ Wojchiechowska, Iza. "The Power of One: Andy Cunningham is answering the 'What can I do?' question so many people ask when it comes to Africa. How his extracurricular pet project is turning into a major movement." Originally published in *The Chronicle* Feb. 2, 2008. Available online at <http://media.www.dukechronicle.com/media/storage/paper884/news/2008/02/05/Features/The-Power.Of.One-3188681.shtml>